HARNESS TRAINING YOUR PARROT
By Wendy Stephens

Training your bird to use a harness can be an intimidating thought. Anyone who has a bird is familiar with how one beak and two feet can seem to multiply rapidly, but we have all seen the notices in the paper of birds that have gotten lost, while outside on their owner’s shoulder. Even clipped birds can still fly and all it takes is one time to lose your bird. A harness is one way to protect your bird from getting lost or hurt during an unexpected flight.

Bird harnesses are made of a lightweight nylon similar to the kind used for dog leashes. The harness fits over the body and under the wings; a lead attaches either to back or chest piece on the harness.

Training a parrot to wear a harness is something you want to put thought into before setting out to do it. It is imperative that you are able to handle your parrot before attempting to train. It is preferable that you be able to handle the area under the wings, head and back of your bird.

Most birds will be frightened by having a strap placed around their neck, be aware of this and take the time to comfort your parrot as you are working with them. If you are not familiar with the harness you are attempting to use, ask the dealer or an experienced friend to help you put it on for the first time.

It is ok to take it slowly – introduce the harness like a new toy. Handle it in the bird’s presence, gently touch them with the harness, draping it across their back or place the loop over their head but do not clip the harness. Have a favorite treat handy to give your parrot. Praise them and give them a treat each time as you progress toward putting on the harness.

After the harness is in place properly, take your bird outdoors for a few minutes – it will show your bird that there is a reason for wearing it and eventually they will equate putting on the harness with going somewhere fun. The first few times they wear the harness, keep the time wearing it short. Each session, gradually lengthen the time spent wearing the harness. Praise your bird and offer treats while wearing the harness to make it a positive time. Try to refrain from scolding your bird during training; otherwise they will see the harness as a threat. Try to end each session on a positive note as you would in any other training.

Keep in mind, once you decide to put the harness on though, follow through. If your bird thinks they can intimidate you into taking it off, they will make it that much harder to put on the next time. Some birds will take to it right away and others will argue with you every time, but eventually it will become second nature in putting it on before leaving the house.
Harnesses come in a wide variety of sizes – cockatiel to macaw. When researching the types of harnesses available on the market there are several things to consider:

1) The fit of the harness – Too big and your bird will be loose the minute you step outside.
2) The type of harness - a loop type neck strap works well for most birds but if your bird has a large crest, such as a cockatoo, a harness with a neck strap that unsnaps would be better.
3) The type of connectors used to clip the harness together. Some harnesses have a plastic snap type of closure or Velcro – These do not hold up to larger beaks, potentially freeing your bird at the wrong time.
4) The complexity of the harness – some harnesses have several rings and clips, which can be difficult to put on a struggling bird.

There are several types of harness available on the internet and in stores; just a few are listed below:
Charlie Macaw Bird Companion Wear has eight sizes of harnesses ranging in price from $19.95 to $28.50, including shipping. Soon they will add yet another harness for budgies. The harness is fastened with one heavy-duty plastic clip and is guaranteed for 30 days free repair for any damage your bird may inflict to it. Rather than simply fixing the harness, the maker will adapt the harness to avoid further breakage, compensating on the design wherever necessary. They were most helpful and told me how they would put on the harness. They set the bird on their knee, hold the back of the head in a parrot grip and slip the harness over the head. Then the strap goes behind the wings and clips together. The clip can be rotated to any position around the bird that you choose. With the exception of the cockatiel and Conure sizes the harness is fully adjustable. It is also possible to design a custom harness for your bird, as she is open to new ideas.

The Fred Bird Company’s harnesses come in six sizes from extra small to large, fitting budgies to hyacinths. The extra small is different from the others necessitated by the size of the birds. These harnesses are the most lightweight, having the least metal parts, which include one D-ring and a buckle, similar to a belt buckle. The owner of Fred Bird Company says that his company has conducted a safety study, which included fifty birds. This harness slips over the head of the parrot. The leash is connected to the D-ring at the chest. The company includes safety tips with the sale of the harness. These harnesses range in price from $14.95 to $23.

Premier Pet Product’s makes a harness called the Feather Tether and sold only through dealers. They are a small husband and wife team who also make humane dog products sold through veterinarians. The harness designs differ with the size of the bird. The petite size uses a black plastic quick snap for smaller birds. The small size uses light snaps on the leash and harness and the mediums and large use heavy duty "baby bolts". The harnesses are fully adjustable for a comfortable fit. These harnesses are clipped together around the neck rather than pulled over the head and then clipped under the wings. Custom orders are available.
Orthobird Products have harnesses available in 3 sizes and in 9 different colors. Small Sized Harness is appropriate for Cockatiels, Conures, Lovebirds and similarly sized birds. The Medium Harness is appropriate for Mini Macaws, Amazons, African Grays, S. Cockatoos, and other similar sized birds. The Large Harness is appropriate for Macaws, Large Cockatoos and similar sized birds. This is the only 2 piece, fully adjustable harness. This harness slips over the head of the parrot. The leash is connected to the D-ring at the chest. They are lightweight, having few metal parts, which include one quick release clip. They have a 45-day warranty. Prices Range from $19.00 to $25.00

This harness is my personal favorite for the ease of use. They can be purchased either by the internet web site or from a dealer.

No matter what you choose, just remember it is for the safety of your bird. Research the harness of your choice to make sure it will work for both of you. Check with others you know to see what works for them. Most stores will let you take the harness out of the package to examine, prior to buying. They should even help you to fit it to your parrot’s size.

I highly recommend taking on the challenge of the harness; it will give you and your bird a sense of freedom without the worry.